

TITLE: Forecasting the Sino-Vietnamese Split

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~~SECRET~~*Out of the closet***FORECASTING THE SINO-VIETNAMESE SPLIT**

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Following the fall of South Vietnam in April 1975, the intelligence community drastically reduced its resources and analytical efforts on Indochina, as succeeding administrations sought to distance themselves from that episode in American history. As the Ford and Carter administrations moved to capitalize on the China initiative begun under Nixon, the US retreated from a clear-cut policy in Southeast Asia; little attention was paid to the storm brewing inside Pol Pot's Cambodia, to the gulf that was developing between Vietnam and China as a result of it, or to the Soviet drive to exploit the rift at the expense of the Chinese in hopes of gaining a much stronger foothold in the newly reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This article examines the efforts of the intelligence community to warn policymakers of the growing tensions between China and Vietnam, and notes how these intelligence assessments lacked sufficient impact, due to the political environment of the time.

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From 1975 through 1977, the volume of finished intelligence reports on Indochina fell dramatically. This drop in assessments reflected both a sharp reduction in analytical resources on the region as well as a waning interest by intelligence consumers in a part of the world where the United States was perceived to have suffered a humiliating military defeat. After the end of US involvement in Vietnam in 1975, the Ford and Carter administrations sought to purge Vietnam from our memory—it was acknowledged as a dark episode which succeeding administrations hoped to distance themselves from. When, in 1976, our Thai allies asked us to close our air bases there and depart, the US complied, but failed to develop an alternative policy in Southeast Asia, preferring instead to view developments there in terms of an acceptable equilibrium between the Chinese and Vietnamese communist regimes on the one hand, and the free governments of ASEAN on the other hand. The reports filtering out of Cambodia (then Kampuchea) about the brutality and genocide of the Pol Pot regime were indeed disturbing, but there was little official recognition at the time that developments there would lead ultimately to a major new realignment of alliances in the region. Cambodia, after all, had been, and remained—in the words of William Shawcross—"a sideshow." The Ford administration focused its attention on Cambodia only long enough to recapture the hijacked US containership SS Mayaguez from the Khmer Rouge government in June 1975. During the succeeding Carter administration, the pursuit of better relations with China became the principal policy goal in Washington.

This political environment had, in my view, a direct bearing on intelligence analysis. The number of US intelligence analysts working on Indochina dropped dramatically after 1975. In the words of a former colleague—an army captain

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with a professional military intelligence background assigned to work on Indochina at DIA in the early 1980s—to have been an army officer assigned to work the Vietnam account in 1976, 1977, or 1978 would have been the career “kiss of death.” The stigma associated with Indochina following the disaster of April 1975 prompted some professional analysts to consider switching from Vietnam to more interesting accounts, and reportedly, more than a few bailed out to work on China, Thailand, and even Brunei. In such an atmosphere, it is certain that a few military professionals pined for an end to their intelligence assignments; after all, the inherent danger associated with driving tanks was far less risky than the career danger associated with being the army captain assigned to produce the Vietnamese ground order of battle in 1977.

This combination of political environment and a sudden drop in analytical resources had a corresponding impact on intelligence production. The number of finished long- and short-term intelligence assessments produced on Indochina by the US intelligence community—principally CIA, DIA, and State—fell from 58 in 1975, the final year of the Vietnam War, to 17 in 1976. In 1977 the number fell to 7. In 1978 the number of finished assessments rose slightly, to 10.

While the quantity of reports on Indochina fell off sharply, the quality of assessments produced remained high. The professionalism and dedication of those few analysts who stuck with the Indochina problem was reflected in the accuracy of their work. Their reporting on political and military developments in the region in the mid-1970s, and ultimately their prediction of the Sino-Vietnamese split and resulting Soviet-Vietnamese alliance stands as an intelligence success. That their assessments lacked the impact that they should have had was due more to the political environment than anything else. An examination of the critical events in the region from 1975 through early 1979, and the judgments which analysts forwarded to policymakers as tensions escalated in 1978, shows intelligence on the target.

### Events

Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978. In February 1979, China launched an attack into Vietnam's six northern border provinces. Relations between Vietnam and China had been steadily declining since 1975:

- In September 1975, China refused to grant Vietnam the amount of aid it had requested.
- In October 1975, Vietnam's Party Secretary Le Duan traveled to Moscow where he obtained considerable Soviet aid and where he endorsed Soviet foreign policy positions.
- By December 1975, the Soviets were involved in assisting Vietnam with some 40 economic projects.
- Throughout 1977 and much of 1978, border clashes took place between Vietnamese troops and the troops of the Beijing-backed Khmer Rouge government of Democratic Kampuchea—the Pol Pot government.
- In March 1978, the Vietnamese government decided to “nationalize” private trade throughout the country. This action most affected the

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Chinese merchant class, resulting in a mass exodus from the country of overseas Chinese.

- In June 1978, Vietnam joined CEMA, the Soviet-bloc economic and trade association.
- In November 1978, Vietnam and the USSR signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation.
- In December 1978, Hanoi announced the formation of a "National Front" in Cambodia, signalling an intention to invade that country.

What took place between 1975 and 1978 was a steady withdrawal of Vietnam from China's sphere of influence. To the Chinese, who had firmly supported North Vietnam during its war with the US, this behavior was an insult, resulting in loss of face and loss of prestige in the region. Also influencing this tense situation was the thawing of relations between the United States and China during the Carter administration. Beijing's new posture was that the Soviet Union—and not the US—was the principal threat to world security. As relations between Hanoi and Beijing worsened, the Chinese could not prevent the Vietnamese from moving into the Soviet sphere, and this was a direct affront to China's foreign policy objectives.

There is reason to believe that both parties would have preferred a resolution of differences to an outright break in relations. This view is supported by Chinese Vice-Premier Deng Xiao Peng's statements to the press in June 1978, when he portrayed Vietnam's actions as a series of "10 steps" against China. According to Deng, only when Hanoi took the "11th step"—the expulsion of overseas Chinese—had the situation reached a turning point. It was at this time that the Chinese leaders began to warn that Hanoi must be, in their words, "punished." Deng further stated that unless Hanoi moderated its policy on ethnic Chinese, Beijing would retaliate. China subsequently ordered three Vietnamese consulates located in South China closed, and began small-scale military maneuvers near the Vietnamese border.

### Analysis

CIA's Office of Regional and Political Analysis produced an Intelligence Assessment in June 1978. Among the key judgments were two perceptive ones which, while not directly forecasting a Chinese military response to Vietnam, did note that relations between Hanoi and Beijing were likely to deteriorate further, and that outright military confrontation was highly possible:

Although both sides realize that neither is likely to benefit from an all-out confrontation, bitterness is so deep that the situation could deteriorate further, especially if the Vietnam-Cambodian fighting intensifies.

The relationship between Peking and Hanoi already has moved into a new and probably protracted stage of open political warfare and heightened military tensions that could threaten the new equilibrium that has developed in Southeast Asia since the end of the Indochina war . . .

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Additionally, the assessment predicted that "Peking can and probably will resort to a number of other measures to remind Hanoi of China's influence and capabilities in the region. They are likely to include further reductions in economic assistance and trade, military posturing along the border, increasing diplomatic attempts to convince other countries—especially in Southeast Asia—to reduce dealings with Vietnam, and perhaps a more aggressive assertion of its claims to islands in the South China Sea, which are disputed by Vietnam as well as other countries."

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Tensions along the Sino-Vietnamese border increased throughout the fall of 1978. In September and October [redacted] revealed that the Vietnamese were increasing their physical defenses along the border with the addition of antiaircraft artillery batteries and SA-3 surface-to-air missile batteries. A report received in early October stated that there had been intensified Vietnamese military movements along the border, including troop reinforcements and SAM deployments.

By mid-October, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and Pacific released an Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (IIM) on Sino-Soviet competition in Indochina. The IIM pointed clearly to the possibility of a Chinese military action against Vietnam. The memorandum stated that should the Vietnam-Cambodian situation worsen to a point which seemed to threaten the independence and stability of the Phnom Penh government, China would be left with three options:

China could greatly increase aid to Phnom Penh . . . This . . . poses the risk . . . of emboldening the Cambodian leadership to provoke Hanoi even further. It could also lead to greater Vietnamese dependence on the USSR for political and military support and therefore to greater Soviet involvement in Vietnam.

China could try to distract Vietnamese attention from Cambodia by a show of force along the border with Vietnam. While this would certainly affect the pace of fighting along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, it would also pose the kind of security threat to Vietnam that could lead Hanoi to permit a marked increase of the Soviet military presence in Vietnam and might also lead to a Soviet show of force along the Sino-Soviet border. China nonetheless might consider such a move if it was assumed that Vietnam was already past the point of no return in forging a close military relationship with the USSR.

China's third option would be to do nothing more for Phnom Penh, letting the chips fall where they might and hoping to capitalize politically and diplomatically in the long run . . .

As we now know, the second of the three options put forth in this estimate accurately predicted the future course of events in the region. What remained for analysts was to monitor the Cambodian situation, measure the Chinese response, and affix a timetable for any possible Chinese military reaction. As noted, Vietnam proceeded with its full-scale invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. The fact that the Vietnamese employed several infantry divisions—including some belonging to three strategic army corps—and that some were

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airlifted into combat from northern Vietnam, showed that this was no short-term punitive military operation. Although it was not until early January that analysts finally reported the Vietnamese SAM emplacements along the Chinese border and Hanoi's increased readiness posture, they had reported six months earlier that the potential for open hostilities between the two countries was very high. (b)(1)

By mid-January 1979, [redacted] had provided strong evidence of (b)(3)(n) a large Chinese military buildup along the Vietnamese border. [redacted]

(b)(1)  
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On 17 February [redacted] the Chinese Army attacked across the Vietnamese frontier at 25 locations. In the ensuing 30-day incursion, the Chinese managed to capture at least five Vietnamese provincial capitals and inflict some punishing blows on their former allies. Subsequent analysis, however, and statements by the Chinese themselves, indicated that the Vietnamese more than held their own and probably inflicted serious casualties on the People's Liberation Army, thus causing more perceptive analysts to question whether China really taught Vietnam a lesson after all.

Despite the timely assessments and warning of war provided to policymakers by the intelligence community months before the fact, some US officials reacted with incredulity when Deng Xiao Peng—on a visit here—inform them of China's intentions in January 1979. Although analysts clearly recognized that confrontation between China and Vietnam was imminent, some officials could not—or would not—believe that Beijing would make a total break with Hanoi. Their refusal to accept this possibility was probably due to several factors, though two seem clear. First, the deterioration of relations between the two countries took place over such a long period that policymakers may have been lulled into a belief that China was bluffing; this was compounded by a general lack of interest in Indochinese affairs by Washington during the preceding three years. Second, Deng's visit here in early 1979 made it difficult, if not impossible, for policymakers to believe that China would act against Vietnam anytime soon.

The intelligence community's forecast of a break in relations between China and Vietnam and the subsequent tactical warning of war were accurate and timely. But the effect was dampened significantly by Washington's lack of interest in Indochina, and by a zealous pursuit of better political and economic relations with Beijing, at the expense of a new and decisive foreign policy toward Southeast Asia.

#### Postscript

The Sino-Vietnamese split and accompanying border war which had been so accurately predicted by US intelligence analysts throughout 1978 resulted in

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renewed interest in Southeast Asian affairs after February 1979. The intelligence community launched a major new effort to study Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and work on the Chinese Army was intensified. New analysts were hired, and the old interagency Vietnam Ground Forces Working Group—dormant since the end of US involvement in Vietnam in 1975—was reconstituted. Analysts were assigned to assess the outcome of the China-Vietnam border war, and predict whether or not China would follow through with threats to teach Vietnam a “second lesson.” Others were assigned the task of analyzing the order of battle and capabilities of the Vietnamese Army; they soon found that most of the files had been packed away in boxes, and that they had to start from scratch. For the next three and one-half years, a team of analysts from CIA, DIA, NSA, State, and Intelligence Center, Pacific (IPAC) met regularly to hammer out a variety of NIEs, SNIEs, IIMs, and order of battle documents. By late 1982, most of the Vietnamese order of battle disagreements had been ironed out,\* allowing analysts to tackle questions relating to ground forces capabilities, command and control, and the future of Cambodia. Throughout this period analysts also kept a close watch on Soviet involvement in Indochina, and in doing so, they witnessed the prophecy of October 1978 come to pass. During 1979 the US intelligence community produced a total of 35 finished assessments on Indochina, 30 of them in the last ten months of the year—after the February 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Just as the low production figures of 1976, 1977, and 1978 reflected a decrease in analytical resources and consumer interest, so the much higher figures of 1979 were indicative of greater analytical resources and a renewed interest in the region. Although some of us who were involved in this later effort on Indochina believed that the US was still a long way from developing a clear-cut policy for Southeast Asia, we at least were comforted by the knowledge that we had an interested audience which read our assessments carefully—a far cry from those analysts who kept watch over Indochina during the unrewarding period of the mid- and late-1970s.

*This article is classified ~~SECRET~~.*

\* “Solving the Vietnam Order Of Battle Puzzle,” *Studies In Intelligence*, Fall 1984 (b)(3)(c)